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OPERATIONS CENTER PRESS

BC-GULF-MILITARY U.S. MILITARY OFFICERS TROUBLED BY GULF PLAN By BERNARD E. TRAINOR c.1987 N.Y. Times News Service

WASHINGTON _ Many senior United States military officers are questioning the wisdom of providing protection to 11 Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf and fear that the United States is being drawn into an open-ended situation over which it has little control.

Knowledgeable senior officers say that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the regional commanders concerned with the Persian Gulf were kept informed of the negotiations and took part in discussions. But one admiral said: "It would be stretching it to say that the chiefs were in on the decision, or even asked their opinion on it."

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Some generals and admirals were critical of the Joint Chiefs for not challenging the proposal to register the tankers under the American flag, whether or not their views were sought.

Two re-flagged Kuwaiti tankers and United States Navy warships from the American Middle East Force are heading for the gulf. They are expected to pass through the Strait of Hormuz the second week of July and come within range of Iranian Silkworm missiles as the convoy heads north to Kuwait.

The crews of the American warships will be at Condition 1, their highest state of battle readiness, as they pass through the strait. They will also be operating under revised rules of engagement, which are said to be more responsive to a hostile threat than those governing the frigate Stark when it was attacked, apparently accidentally, by an Iraqi aircraft in May. Thirty-seven American sailors were killed in the attack.

American military officers who were interviewed said that they did not foresee trouble on this initial passage. They were also confident that the Navy could cope with any subsequent threat at sea from the Iranians.

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In spite of this confidence shown by the military, many admirals and generals in and out of Washington admit misgivings about the administration's re-flagging policy because they do not know how long it will take, nor where it will lead. More than a dozen senior officers spoke of their concerns on the condition that they not be identified.

One officer said that throughout the nearly seven-year-old war between Iran and Iraq, the United States has officially taken a neutral position and upheld the principle of freedom of navigation with a small but representative force of warships in the gulf.

An admiral said that this official policy of neutrality was undone by the

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'By re-flagging the Kuwaiti ships, the United States has placed itself on the side of Iraq,' he said. 'This may mend fences with the gulf state Arabs, but it is apt to create the very confrontation which for years we sought to avoid in the region.'

Robert Hall, a spokesman for the National Security Council, expressed surprise that there was uneasiness within the upper military over re-flagging. Hall said that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were involved in the decision-making process from the beginning and fully supported the move.

The deliberations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are classified, but in response to a question on the White House decision to re-flag the ships, the departing Marine commandant, Gen. P.X. Kelley, a member of the Joint Chiefs, said last Thursday: 'Life is full of lousy options' from which choices sometimes had to be made. In that context, he said, he supported the re-flagging.

According to the knowledgeable officers, few in the military took the original Kuwaiti request seriously. They were surprised when Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, who has had a reputation for prudence in the use of military forces, became a champion of re-flagging the Kuwaiti tankers.

These officers understood that Weinberger's inquiries to the military focused on its technical ability to support the policy, not the wisdom of the policy itself. Some senior officers ascribed this turnaround more to Weinberger's reaction to the political furor over the Iran-contra affair than to any change in his customary belief in military restraint. 'Politics overcame philosophy,' one officer said.

The officers following the developments in the Persian Gulf expressed their greatest concern that the tilt toward Iraq implicit in the re-flagging decision limits the control the United States would have over future events in the region.

Most naval officers do not expect the Iranians to challenge the Navy directly in the gulf unless, as one admiral suggested, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Iranian leader, saw some propaganda value in it.

The greatest threat to American warships is believed to be in acts of terrorism where the Iranians have shown expertise. There is particular concern that the headquarters of the United States Middle East Force in Bahrain might be a vulnerable target.

The danger of escalation as the result of a hostile Iranian act either at sea or ashore also concerns the senior military leadership.

'What are the second and third order of effects if Khomeini attacks our forces and we strike back?' a general said. The danger of an initial, violent confrontation with Iran may have been recognized in the White House, he said, but he wondered how much thought had been given to where a repetitious and ever-increasing spiral of violence would lead.

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